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The school's logo reflects its commitment to teaching tradition through creative arts.

Performing Torah

Kids Kehilla offers a unique approach to religious school.

By Beverly Gray, *Education Editor*

Kids Kehilla bills itself as “a different kind of religious school.” It is different partly because of its emphasis on theater as a way of introducing children to their Jewish heritage. Also out of the ordinary is the way Kids Kehilla is being used by its founders, Rabbi Moshe ben Asher and Khulda bat Sarah, as the focal point for a newly emerging congregation, Kehillat Kharakim. Kharakim is the Hebrew word for lattice used in Song of Songs, implying “an opening through which one can see beyond to something else,” ben Asher says.

The founders, a married couple, most recently served as a “rabbi team” for Congregation Beth Israel in Chico. There they put into practice their ideas that children can be, in ben Asher’s words, “both learners and teachers within the religious life of the congregation.” But in Chico, Jews were in short supply. So last fall the pair came to Southern California and found space at the Westside JCC to launch both a school and a congregation. Their original plan was to offer a four-sessions-a-week after-school curriculum, featuring Hebrew and Torah studies along with fine arts experiences. What they discovered is that local kids are too highly scheduled for anything but a once-a-week program, which currently meets on Wednesday afternoons.

Kids Kehilla’s 10 or so members come from a variety of backgrounds. Some attend nearby Jewish day schools, while others have little experience with organized religion. But all seem happy to be involved. A sixth-grader named Annabel explains, “I like it ‘cause you get to do theatrical stuff and you can contribute your ideas sometimes.”

Every two weeks, ben Asher and bat Sarah introduce an original musical play they’ve written, illustrating a Torah lesson. One example: “A Blessing Will Come” uses the story of a generous farmer to teach the value of giving *tzedakah* cheerfully.

The play will be presented in place of a sermon at the congregation’s biweekly Friday night service, which draws some 30 people of all ages for prayer, song, and a vegetarian potluck dinner.

Ben Asher makes clear that “we’re not terribly interested in a [professional] performance.” Much more important is the fact that the children take on “a serious role in the adult life of the congregation.” When the number of young actors dwindles, parents sometimes pitch in. A dad named Roy speaks of how his entire family dressed up in biblical costumes to perform at a recent service; he has high praise for “this active experiential approach to Jewish learning.”

By settling in the Fairfax district, ben Asher has in a sense come full circle. He grew up locally, but says, with a laugh, “I was a juvenile delinquent. I was a million miles from being a rabbi.” He joined the Air Force at 17, then attended UC Berkeley, where he earned a doctorate in community organizing and social development. It was only 14 years ago that he discovered the spiritual aspects of his community work, receiving his ordination from Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who he calls “the *zayde* of the Jewish Renewal movement.” He and his wife of 10 years eventually decided to adopt their Hebrew names as their legal monikers. They work closely together, though when bat Sarah is out of earshot, her husband proudly announces that “she has a gift for devising pedagogy through her own learning.”

In the future, the couple hopes to expand their Kids Kehilla to include Hebrew-language instruction. They also have dreams of a congregation that meets more often than once every two weeks. Says ben Asher, “Would we like to have a Shabbat morning service? Would we ever!”